Grade inflation for Boston teachers?

By Meg Campbell 
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Recently, I raised the question at a Boston School Committee meeting of whether we have a version of “grade inflation” when 92 percent of Boston Public School teachers are rated proficient or exemplary. Boston Teachers Union President Richard Stutman stated my remark was insulting. I would like to explain why I respectfully differ.

In September 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education rated at least 40 percent of our district schools as poorly performing (level 3: 48 schools, level 4: 12 schools). This excluded 22 schools which received no rating due to recent reorganizations or insufficient data, though a number of these also have low MCAS scores. I would argue our point of departure for school quality improvement is recognizing that more than 50 percent of our schools currently are poorly performing. We can’t get to our destination of high quality schools for every child if we can’t agree on our point of departure.

At the same School Committee meeting, I noted that as a charter leader, I too am going through the new state evaluation process, and that in my own self-evaluation, I had noted areas where I “need improvement.” If I don’t have any areas for continued growth, then I ought to hang it up. I believe it is important to model a culture of continuous improvement, and it happens also to be what I believe. I don’t want to live in Lake Wobegon. I want to go to the Olympics. And I bring urgency to that aspiration. The children can’t wait.

Parents send their children to schools, not districts. Students attend schools, not districts. The unit of change for student achievement is at the school level, not the district.

Ron Edmonds’s groundbreaking research at Harvard in the 1970s on effective schools for low income children of color established that the single most important factor in determining whether or not a school is successful is the school principal. Why? Because the principal is responsible for hiring, supporting, and evaluating teachers. A school can only be as strong as its principal and teachers.

Since my appointment to the Boston School Committee by Mayor Menino in January 2012, I have focused on my conviction that the 128 most important people in our district are our superintendent and our 127 principals. I am looking forward to timely data on principal evaluations. The analysis of the trends in the teacher evaluations clearly need further investigation to ensure principals’ are evaluating without racial, gender or age bias.

Every other employee’s performance is linked to those 128 key leaders’ ability to execute our mission to provide a quality education to every child. Holding principals — and teachers — to a high level of both growth and performance is a sign of respect, just as holding students to a high level of growth and achievement is a sign of our respect for their intelligence and capacity to grow.
I have worked as a district employee in two urban districts (Boston and Chelsea) and as a consultant/coach to schools ranging from San Antonio to Denver to New York City. Decades of experience working in urban districts prompted me to start a charter school 13 years ago, because I realized that I would not live long enough to see the kind of urban school that was in my head come to realization given the reality of constraints in every urban district I knew. I opted for the freedom and increased accountability of a Massachusetts charter school in my own community, Dorchester. Proudly I can say that the school where I work is far, far better than the one that I envisioned in 2000, because it has been created by the intelligence, creativity and hard work of all of us who continuously work to execute our shared mission and vision.

So, yes, I do raise the question of how 92 percent of our Boston Public School teachers can be rated proficient or exemplary when more than 50 percent of our schools are low performing? Shall we just blame the kids?

In 1978, Ron Edmonds gave a speech, “Some Schools Work and more Can”: We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need, in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.”

It doesn’t matter if our intentions are stellar, if our results are not. As Edmonds challenged us back in 1978, we already know more than we need.

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